

“I know you think that I should be happy, but I’m not sure how to feel. Everything is changing again!”

Tips for Helping a Child After Deployment

A deployment reunion can be a time of great joy and great uncertainty. It took months during the deployment for the family to fall into a new rhythm. Roles were established, expectations set, and routines fell into place. As the active duty parent returns to the family, all this will have to be renegotiated. Change, even as positive as a loved one’s return, can be stressful. You have a lifetime of experiences and skills to help you deal with the post-deployment transition. Your children, on the other hand, are relying on you to help guide them through this adjustment. Here are a few tips to “HELP” you help them.

H is for humor

Try to keep your sense of humor over the coming weeks. Laugh when things don’t go exactly as planned. Laugh (and, OK, possibly cry) when your baby is up during the night again as she takes in all the changes. Laugh at all those moments that, at the time, seem less than amusing. If you can, pack up the family, head to a park, and enjoy having everyone together again.

E is for empathy

As you prepare for the homecoming, you will probably find yourself distracted. It may be difficult to focus on the everyday stuff as you daydream about the reunion. It may be difficult understanding why your toddler does not seem as thrilled as you about her parent’s homecoming. You may wonder why she’s being so challenging. Take a moment to view the homecoming from her perspective. She might be sensing the changes that are coming.

Babies and toddlers thrive on routine and

consistency; it helps make them feel safe. The whirlwind of activity and change that accompanies a homecoming can seem disorienting. For a young baby, for example, this may be the first time she is meeting her active duty parent. She might pick up on the tension as the returning parent deals with new parent jitters. She might scream and protest every time she’s picked up. A 2-year old might become more aggressive at day care, acting out her distress over all the changes at home. An older toddler might wonder how his relationship with his remaining parent will be affected now that his deployed parent has returned.

Take time out to “listen” to your babies and toddlers, remembering that young children cannot express themselves the same way adults can. Acting out is often their only way of expressing that something is wrong. Accept their feelings, even if you don’t accept their behavior. Encourage them to use their words. You should also label their feelings if they are unable to do so themselves. For example, you might say “I know you feel upset. It’s not OK to push your friends, even when you are feeling upset. When you feel that way, use your words and talk to us. We all love you and want to help you feel better.”

L is for learning

This is your chance to become an expert in early child development. Don’t waste time and energy getting children to do what they are not yet ready to do. It’s easy to become frustrated. When you better understand your child’s developmental stage, you have a better understanding of what to expect of them. Read books from the library.

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Explore the ZERO TO THREE Web site (www.zerotothree.org) for information on child development. Attend a free parenting class and/or request a home visitor through the New Parent Support Program or other home visitation program. Encourage your spouse to do the same.

Some developmental phases can take on new meaning during reunification. Separation anxiety, the stress babies feel with the primary caregiver's absence, can begin around 6 months and continue, off and on, throughout the early years. Stranger anxiety, fear of anyone but the primary caregiver, may occur as well. It is natural that, after a significant separation, a baby may be cautious of the returning parent and need time to get reacquainted. Potty learning is another milestone that may be complicated during a major change. A toddler can regress (a return to earlier behavior) during stressful times. Potty learning might just go out the window during a post-deployment reunion. If you have any concern over this or other behavioral changes, contact your child's pediatrician.

Remember, developmental phases overlap, and each child is different. Although it is important to be aware of general developmental stages, it is just as important to be in tune with your child and to respond sensitively to her individual needs.

P is for patience

It takes time for families to create new post-deployment routines and for members to really feel like they're back on track.

The returning parent may or may not be anxious to step back into the parenting role. Some parents are overly eager and may need to go at a slower pace. Young children need time to adjust. Going to the park, reading a bedtime book, singing a lullaby, and playing with building blocks are just some of the ways in which the active duty parent can spend quality time with the child while rebuilding that special bond.

On the other hand, some returning parents may feel uncomfortable taking on caregiver responsibilities. They may be meeting their child for the first time and feel uneasy. They may be having difficulty transitioning to being home again. This can be frustrating for the parent who has shouldered the responsibilities and is looking for a well-deserved break. It is important that family members talk about their expectations and concerns and seek additional support when needed.

Parents who have gone through combat deployments may experience reactions, including unwanted thoughts about a traumatic event, nightmares and/or flashbacks associated with a traumatic event, sleep difficulties, feeling jumpy or easily startled, feeling irritable, or feeling emotionally numb (Foa, Hembree, Riggs, Rauch, & Franklin, n.d.). These reactions can complicate the reunion and increase stress in the home for everyone, including the youngest children. Families are encouraged to seek professional assistance when needed. Contact your installation Family Center or Military OneSource at 1-800-342-9647 for support and referral.

ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit whose mission is to support the healthy development and well-being of infants, toddlers, and their families. For more information on ways to support you and your young children visit our Web site at: www.zerotothree.org/military

Reference

Foa, E. B., Hembree, E. A., Riggs, D., Rauch, S., & Franklin, M. (n.d.). *Common reactions to trauma*. Retrieved August 25, 2006, from www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/disasters/fs_foa_handout.html

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